Introducing the Issue

Sara McLanahan, Elisabeth Donahue, and Ron Haskins

Marriage has become a hot topic on the American domestic policy scene. The Bush administration is proposing to spend $1.5 billion over the next five years to increase “healthy” marriages.1 Gays and lesbians are demanding the right to marry.2 A few states are reconsidering no-fault divorce laws and experimenting with new types of “covenant marriage.”3 And legislators are scrutinizing tax and transfer policies for “marriage penalties.”4 These initiatives have been spurred by changes in marriage and childbearing during the latter part of the twentieth century and by mounting social science evidence that these changes are not in the best interests of children.

The goal of this volume is to lay out the major issues in the debate over marriage and to provide readers with some facts and a context to help them understand the debate. Most people find it difficult to talk about marriage, because many of the issues reflect deeply felt values. Thoughtful people are torn about what to make of all the changes in marriage and family life over the past half-century and what to do about them. Moreover, the social science evidence is not as conclusive as we might like it to be. Of necessity we lack the gold standard of evaluation research: people cannot be randomly assigned to different family structures and then compared with respect to their outcomes. Instead we must rely on theory and empirical evidence drawn from non-experimental data. Nevertheless, given the importance of marriage and family life and given the government’s growing involvement in funding marriage programs, we believe the topic merits the attention of a journal devoted to improving policies for children.

Background

From roughly 1900 until 1960, the ages of both men and women at marriage declined steadily, and the share of adults who ever married grew. After 1960, both trends reversed. Couples began postponing marriage, and cohabiting unions became more common. Divorce rates, which had been rising throughout the century, accelerated after 1960, and the share of children born to unmarried parents increased sharply.5 Together these trends led to a dramatic increase in

www.futureofchildren.org
single-mother families. Whereas in 1970 only 12 percent of families with children were headed by a single mother, by 2003 that share had more than doubled, to 26 percent.6 More than half of all children born today are expected to live apart from a parent before they reach age eighteen; the shares are even higher among African American and Hispanic children.7

The decline in two-parent families after 1960 was closely linked with a rise in child poverty. Poverty rates have always been higher in single-mother families than in two-parent families. Indeed, government programs such as Mothers’ Pensions, Survivors Insurance, and Aid to Families with Dependent Children were created in the first half of the twentieth century to help alleviate the poverty of single mothers, most of whom were widows.8 The rapid growth in single-mother families after 1960, together with the declining share of widowed mothers and the rising share of divorced and never-married mothers, however, led to renewed interest in the economic plight of single mothers and their children. The term “feminization of poverty” was coined by Diana Pearce to emphasize the increasing concentration of poverty in the United States in families headed by single mothers.9 To dramatize her point, Pearce argued that if then-current trends were to continue, all of the nation’s poor would be living in female-headed families by the turn of the millennium. Although that prediction turned out to be an overstatement, the link between single motherhood and poverty continues. In 2003, the U.S. poverty rate for children living in married households was 8.4 percent. For children living in single-mother households, it was 38.4 percent.10

Social science research on children in divorced families also contributed to the growing concern over the long-term consequences of changes in marriage and family formation. In the early 1970s the prevailing view among scholars was that, aside from the problem of low income, single motherhood was an acceptable alternative to marriage. But the empirical evidence compiled during the 1980s and 1990s suggested otherwise.11 In her 1999 presidential address to the Population Association of America, Linda Waite argued that marriage had multiple benefits for adults and children over and above its effects on child poverty, including better health and greater socioeconomic attainment.12 Nobel prize–winning economist George Akerlof made a similar case for fatherhood being beneficial to men and society.13

Questions and Controversies

Although most people today would probably agree that a “good” or “healthy” marriage is the ideal setting for raising children, substantial disagreement exists about what it takes to achieve such a union. Some people argue that a good or healthy marriage is one in which both parents have a strong commitment to stay together “for the sake of the children.” Others contend that it is a low-conflict relationship or a relationship in which parents resolve their disagreements amicably. Still others maintain that it is a
Observers also disagree about the role of government in promoting one family form over another. Some people believe that intimate relationships, including marriage, are private and should not be the province of the government. This “zone of privacy” is cited in a long line of Supreme Court cases governing the rights of individuals to make their own choices regarding private matters such as reproductive and sexual conduct. All these cases confirm that constitutional protection must be afforded personal decisions about marriage, procreation, contraception, and family relationships.

Others believe that government should do more to strengthen two-parent families but disagree about exactly what should be done. Some argue that the decline in marriage is rooted in cultural problems and that the best way to increase marriage rates is to change attitudes, lifestyles, and interpersonal skills. As noted above, the Bush administration, for example, is proposing to spend $1.5 billion over the next five years on programs to educate people about the benefits of marriage and to improve relationship and communication skills among low-income couples. Critics of this proposal argue that marriage programs may encourage some single mothers to remain in violent relationships. They also worry that money for low-income single mothers will be diverted to marriage education programs.

Others argue that the decline in marriage rates is rooted in structural problems that have reduced the economic advantages of marriage. If so, policies that increase the income of disadvantaged two-parent families by reducing marriage penalties in the nation’s tax and transfer systems may be more effective than those that aim to change attitudes and lifestyles. Even among those who believe that economic barriers are more important than cultural barriers, there is disagreement about the importance of marriage penalties in discouraging marriage. Underlying this debate is a fear that federal and state policymakers might try to eliminate marriage penalties in social programs by reducing benefits to single-parent families rather than increasing benefits to married couples.

Finally, disagreement about whether extending marriage to gay and lesbian parents would help or harm children is widespread. Conservatives argue that allowing gays and lesbians to marry would harm children and, more important, weaken the institution of marriage. Liberals, in contrast, argue that all couples should have the right to marry regardless of their sexual orientation. Values are much more important than social science evidence in this debate.

What Does This Volume Do?
To provide our readers with a context for understanding the debate over marriage, we selected several central topics and invited some of the country’s leading scholars to share their expertise. Two authors were asked to examine recent economic, demographic, and social developments that have affected marriage and to comment on the causes and consequences of these trends.

A second group of authors was asked to review the social science research on the economic, social, emotional, and cognitive benefits of marriage for adults and children. They also were asked whether these benefits extend to children raised by same-sex parents. The literature on the benefits of heterosexual marriage is vast, so the authors were asked to...
give their assessments of the very best research in these areas. In contrast, data on the benefits to children of same-sex marriage are quite limited. Here, we asked the authors to draw on theory as well as empirical evidence to make their case.

One notable feature of the many demographic changes over the past half-century is the increasing concentration of single motherhood, in particular never-married motherhood, among low-income women. Thus we asked a third pair of authors to focus explicitly on low-income single mothers and to examine the barriers to marriage facing this group. Finally, we asked two groups of authors to examine two marriage proposals now being discussed by state and federal policymakers: the Bush marriage-promotion initiative and efforts to reduce the marriage penalties in the tax and transfer system.

What Do We Learn from the Articles?
The articles in this volume provide the latest information and findings on marriage. Full summaries are provided at the beginning of each article. In this section, we focus on the findings we think are most important.

Marriage as a Public Issue
Steven Nock observes that there is an emerging political, cultural, and scientific consensus that children do best in families with two loving parents. He sees the contemporary marriage debate as the nation’s recognition of the cultural nature of the problem. In this view, the debate is a crucial national conversation among Americans struggling to interpret and make sense of the role that marriage and the family play in today’s society. He also points out that although large cultural and social forces are driving the decline in marriage, most of the new U.S. programs attempting to restore or strengthen marriage focus on changing individuals, not their culture or society. He argues that the problem cannot be addressed solely at the individual level and cautions that given how little researchers and professionals know about helping couples get or stay married, expectations of policies in these areas should be modest.

Trends
Andrew Cherlin notes that sentiment in favor of marriage appears to be stronger in the United States than it is in other developed countries. The share of U.S. adults who are likely to marry is larger, but so is the share likely to divorce. U.S. children are also more likely to live in single-parent families. Given these patterns, American policymakers are unlikely to be able to raise U.S. family stability to levels typical of other developed countries. Consequently, a family policy that relies too heavily on marriage will not help the many children destined to live in single-parent and cohabiting-parent families—many of them poor—during their formative years. Cherlin argues that assistance must be directed to needy families regardless of their household structure. Policymakers must craft a careful balance of marriage-based and marriage-neutral programs to provide adequate support to American children.

Financial Consequences
Adam Thomas and Isabel Sawhill show that across all races and for a variety of income measures, children in single-parent families have less family income and are more likely to be poor than children in married-parent families. Cohabiting families are generally better off economically than single-parent families, but considerably worse off than married-parent families. The authors acknowledge that although “selection” (the fact that more-educated couples are more likely
to marry than less-educated couples) may explain part of the link between family structure and family economic resources, their evidence indicates that family structure does affect family resources; single parenthood reduces children’s economic prospects and marriage improves them. Like Cherlin, they argue that policymakers may not be able to do much to reverse the trends in family structure. They also point out that marriage is not an economic cure-all for the complex problem of child poverty. Instead, Thomas and Sawhill suggest that declines in single parenthood may offer the greatest promise for improving the economic welfare of children in the United States.

Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Consequences
Paul Amato shows that children growing up with two continuously married parents are less likely than other children to experience a wide range of cognitive, emotional, and social problems, not only during childhood but also in adulthood. He attributes the advantages associated with two-parent families to a higher standard of living, more effective parenting, more cooperative co-parenting, better quality relationships between parents and children, and fewer stressful events and circumstances. Despite these advantages, Amato argues that interventions that increase the share of children who grow up with both parents would produce only modest improvements in the overall well-being of U.S. children, because children’s social or emotional problems have many causes. Nevertheless, interventions that lower only modestly the overall share of U.S. children who experience various problems could lower substantially the number of children facing these problems. Even a small decline in percentages, when multiplied by the many children in the population, is a substantial social benefit.

Gay Marriage
William Meezan and Jonathan Rauch argue that marriage confers three types of benefits on children of heterosexual parents—material benefits, stability, and social acceptance—and that these benefits would be likely to carry over to children of married same-sex parents. They also note that the empirical research carried out to date suggests that children being raised by gay parents are doing about as well as children normally do. The existing research, however, is based on rather special samples, and thus we do not know whether the children in these studies are typical of the general population of children raised by gay and lesbian couples. We also have little sense of how changing marriage laws for gay and lesbian couples might affect children in heterosexual families. The authors note that the best way to ascertain the costs and benefits of same-sex marriage on children is to compare it with the alternatives. And they suggest that such a comparison is now possible because the United States is already running a limited, localized experiment: Massachusetts is marrying same-sex couples; Vermont and Connecticut are offering civil unions; and several states are offering partner-benefit programs.

A family policy that relies too heavily on marriage will not help the many children destined to live in single-parent and cohabiting-parent families—many of them poor—during their formative years.
Marriage in Low-Income Communities
Kathryn Edin and Joanna Reed review recent research on social and economic barriers to marriage among the poor and discuss the efficacy of efforts by federal and state policymakers to promote marriage among poor unmarried couples. They note that disadvantaged men and women place a high value on marriage but are reluctant to make a formal commitment because they are unable to meet the high standards of relationship quality and financial stability they believe are necessary to sustain a marriage and avoid divorce. In view of these findings, Edin and Reed argue that public campaigns to convince poor Americans of the value of marriage are preaching to the choir. Because disadvantaged men and women view some degree of financial stability as a prerequisite for marriage, policymakers must address the instability and low pay of the jobs lower-income people typically hold as well as devise ways to promote homeownership and other asset development to encourage marriage. Encouraging more low-income couples to marry without giving them the tools to maintain a stable union may simply increase divorce rates.

Marriage Programs
Robin Dion examines some of the programs that have inspired the Bush administration’s marriage initiative and asks whether they are likely to be effective. She notes that they were designed for and evaluated using middle-class couples rather than the disadvantaged couples whom the Bush initiative will target. For the initiative to succeed, program curriculums will need to be responsive to and respectful of the interests and circumstances of low-income families. Although efforts to adapt these programs to disadvantaged populations are now under way, it is not yet known whether they will be successful. Dion notes that the Administration for Children and Families is planning to test several of the most important of the new marriage programs scientifically and on a large scale to learn whether they will work and whether the effects on couple relationships will translate into benefits for children.

Marriage and the Tax and Transfer Systems
Adam Carasso and Eugene Steuerle argue that marriage penalties are a result of policymakers’ efforts to achieve the goal of progressivity—giving greater tax and welfare benefits to those with lower income—while trying to keep down program costs. Under the current tax and transfer system, tax obligations rise and transfer program benefits fall, sometimes steeply, as households earn more income. As a result, many low- to moderate-income families face high effective marginal tax rates. These high rates produce large marriage penalties: additional income brought into a household by marriage causes other benefits to be reduced or lost altogether. In extreme cases, households can lose a dollar or more for every dollar earned. The authors offer several options for reducing or eliminating the marriage penalty, and recommend two in particular. The first is to set a maximum marginal tax rate for lower-income individuals, similar to the maximum rate set for highest-income individuals. The second is to provide individual wage subsidies to lower-income earners, so that such workers who marry can combine their income with that of their spouses without incurring penalties.

Implications: What Should Be Done?
The articles in this volume confirm that children benefit from growing up with two married biological parents. The articles also support a more active government role in encouraging the formation and maintenance
of stable, low-conflict, two-parent families. We use the words “stable” and “low-conflict” because the evidence is clear that unstable marriages and high-conflict relationships are harmful to children. The articles also suggest that two specific public policies, one to improve the economic conditions of low-income two-parent families and the other to enhance relationship quality among low-income couples, may well lead to higher marriage rates and more stable unions.

The first policy would reduce the marriage penalty. That a low-income single mother faces a larger financial penalty than a middle-income mother if she decides to marry is a serious problem that appears to run counter to the values of most Americans. As the volume points out, marriage penalties are not the result of deliberate government action; they are an accident of history. When the welfare system was created in the mid-1930s, most single mothers were widows, and policymakers did not worry about the negative incentives implicit in any income-tested program. Today widows account for only a small share of single mothers, and marriage penalties in the transfer system are likely to affect many more poor single mothers.

The problem, we realize, is complicated. The competing interests of providing a safety net for low-income families and taxing higher-income families at higher rates sometimes conflict with a policy to encourage parents to combine incomes and marry. That said, we believe that the decision to marry should not result in a loss of tax or transfer benefits for lower-income families. Such losses, as the articles in this volume point out, have serious negative repercussions for children. Economic security is essential to the development of healthy children; indeed, it is one of the main arguments for increasing marriage rates. Because most of the penalties for low-income couples come from transfer programs rather than the tax system, reform efforts should be focused there. Although extending benefits to low-income married couples will increase public costs, such a step is not without precedent: Congress reduced the tax penalties for low-income families in the 2001 tax legislation by making the child tax credit partially refundable for low-income working families.

A second promising policy is marriage programs. Although several articles note that the scientific basis for programs that promote and strengthen marriage is weak, that only a few model programs have been evaluated using scientific methods, and that no program has been tested on low-income couples, there is some evidence to suggest that middle-class couples have benefited from such programs. This finding has several implications for the new marriage programs. First, it suggests the need to proceed slowly and cautiously. Second, it suggests that the Bush administration’s plan to make funds available to design and implement innovative programs and to conduct demonstrations and evaluations is good policy, particularly if the evalu-
tions are based on random-assignment and long-term experimental designs. Finally, it implies that the Department of Health and Human Services should make all findings of the evaluations available to all states and should provide technical assistance to states or other groups that are starting marriage programs. Programs that receive federal or state funding should also be required to show that the curriculums they chose are effective for the population being served.

Marriage programs must also be tailored to meet the needs of low-income parents. We say this not because we think that government involvement is appropriate only for poor people, but because marriage is in the most trouble in low-income families. Wealthier families are able to purchase private marriage counseling, and over the past two decades divorce rates for well-to-do families have been falling. To be effective, marriage programs aimed at low-income couples need to address the serious financial issues these couples face, as well as the problems created by multiple-partner fertility, domestic violence, and the culture of distrust explored by Edin and Reed in this volume. Such programs would teach relationship skills, help couples reach their economic goals by bolstering their earnings, and address substance abuse as it imperils a marriage. Researchers who understand low-income communities should help plan these programs.

Finally, the volume tells us that marriage is not a cure-all for poverty, and that single-parent households will always be a part of the American family scene. Although we wholly support the funding and evaluation of marriage programs aimed at low-income families, we believe it would be a mistake for policymakers to focus on marriage to the exclusion of other strategies for helping single-parent families. Among such strategies, alleviating poverty, improving parent-child bonds, and reducing teenage childbearing and unintended pregnancies are especially promising. Although examining such strategies is outside the scope of this volume, we want to make clear that we see efforts to reduce out-of-wedlock births, teen pregnancy in particular, as an essential part of a marriage-promotion strategy. Similarly, the public safety net for single-parent families must remain intact. Promoting marriage should not be a proxy for cutting programs for single parents. Finally, even if parents do not marry, it is still important for children to have relationships with both their mothers and their fathers. Programs to encourage fathers’ involvement—both monetary and emotional—must continue. A strong child support system that holds both parents financially responsible for their children and a fair court system that encourages joint involvement must be supported and improved. All these programs are crucial to the overall mission to increase the number of healthy marriages.

Although marriage has undergone profound changes in the past forty years, it continues to be the most effective family structure in which to raise children. Low-income children, in particular, stand to reap large gains in terms of family stability if marriage can be restored as the norm for parents. Despite our many caveats, we support government efforts to increase the numbers of children raised in healthy, married households. Because the subject of marriage is deeply personal and fraught with emotion for most people, discussing government involvement in marriage can be difficult. We hope that this volume can bring both evidence and balance to the debate.
Endnotes

1. The Bush administration proposal on building healthy marriages would create two programs. One would provide $100 million a year in grants to states to design and implement marriage-promotion activities. The second, also of $100 million a year, would be retained by the secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services to fund research on healthy marriage and demonstration programs. In the former program, states must match the federal grant on a dollar-for-dollar basis, thus bringing total funding for the state program to $200 million a year if states match all the federal dollars. The funding for both programs together would be $300 million a year for five years, or $1.5 billion. Both the House and Senate bills would terminate an existing program that provides $100 million a year in bonuses to states for reducing rates of nonmarital births, thereby offsetting part of the cost of the marriage initiative. See Mary Parke, *Marriage-Related Provisions in Welfare Reauthorization Proposals: A Summary* (Washington: Center for Law and Social Policy, March 1, 2004).


6. U.S. Census Bureau, “America’s Families and Living Arrangements: 2003,” Current Population Reports (November 2004), p. 8. Although the vast majority of single parents are women, the number of single fathers is also rising rapidly in the United States. From 1970 to 2003, single-father families grew from 1 percent to 6 percent of all families with children. Ibid. Although the incidence of poverty in single-father families is about half that of those headed by single mothers, children living with single fathers are a little more than two times as poor as those living with married parents. U.S. Census Bureau, *Current Population Survey, 2003, Annual Social and Economic Supplement*, table C3.


18. Some liberals such as Wendell Primus, an economist who works for Nancy Pelosi, the minority leader of the U.S. House of Representatives, argue that marriage penalties are much lower than usually portrayed. Wendell E. Primus and Jennifer Beeson, “Safety Net Programs, Marriage, and Cohabitation,” in *Just Living Together: Implications of Cohabitation on Families, Children, and Social Policy*, edited by Alan Booth and Ann C. Crouter (Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum, 2002). A recent analysis of nationally representative data by Gregory Acs and Elaine Maag of the Urban Institute shows that most low-income cohabiting couples (those below 200 percent of poverty) would receive a bonus of around $2,400 from tax provisions if they got married (in 2008, when tax changes enacted in 2001 had been fully phased in). However, if the cohabiting couple had been on cash welfare from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, marriage would result in a loss of nearly $2,000 in TANF benefits, thereby greatly reducing their total marriage bonus. Acs and Maag, “Irreconcilable Differences?” (see note 4).


22. See Acs and Maag, “Irreconcilable Differences?” (see note 4), and the article by Adam Carasso and C. Eugene Steuerle in this volume. Generally, Acs and Maag find far fewer penalties than do Carasso and Steuerle. Much of the difference stems from the transfer programs on which the analyses are based: Acs and Maag include only TANF, while Carasso and Steuerle incorporate a host of means-tested social programs. Both sets of authors find that if one looks just at the tax system, most low-income families receive subsidies rather than penalties; only when the transfer programs are considered do their conclusions diverge.